A PARTISAN GOD
Luke 1:38-56
December 11, 1983

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It is not the easiest assignment in the world to engage your mind with the idea that there is a God who cares. We are far better at discussing God in the remote and passionless language of the classroom. We call God the "first cause," and "ground of being," the "holy other." And then comes Advent and the remarkable suggestion that God cares, that the "first cause" and "ground of being" is actually better described in parental terms, that God loves in fact, that when it comes to individual human beings and the whole lot of us together, the race, the human family, God is definitely a partisan.

In the history of remarkable ideas, that is a peculiarly Hebrew suggestion. That God has a heart, that God can't help responding to human need, that God always favors the underdog and inclines his ear to the downtrodden, the weak, the poor, is a Jewish contribution. The deities of ancient people were at best ambivalent about the human condition. A person who wanted some attention had to pound away at the heavenly door, as it were or offer up persuasive tribute in the form of sacrifices just to get a day in court. But the children of Israel, the Hebrews, when they wrote about their experience as slaves in Egypt and their remarkable deliverance told about Jahweh, the God who could hear the groaning of his people in bondage, and who was touched by that groaning, and who was motivated to throw in on their side and help them get out of there. The astonishing claim in the Exodus story isn't that the Hebrews beat the Egyptian army across a swamp called the Sea of Reeds, but that the Lord God of creation heard their cries and cared about their plight. The God of the Bible, from the beginning to the end, is one who has compassion, who responds to those in need, those particularly who know they are in need.

Early in this remarkable story an anti-hero emerges. If God is partisan to the needy, the opposite of the needy appears as a bit of a problem. The anomaly in the Bible, the one who is missing the point, is the one who doesn't need God or thinks he doesn't need God. The Bible uses a series of catch words for these people: words like "the proud, the mighty, the vain." Often it is those who are influential, powerful, wealthy, who seem to miss the point and who end up out of touch, out of the picture.

In the first century these ideas resonated deeply in the hearts of a people who were under the thumb of Rome, whose streets were occupied by Roman Legions, whose economy had been pressed into Roman service. In the Palestine of the first century, God's partisanship for his needy, oppressed people was a powerful idea.

So it is that a Galilean peasant maid visits her cousin Elizabeth, and describes her pregnancy in a wonderful hymn using very partisan language: "He has scattered the proud, he has put down the mighty, he has filled the hungry with good things, the rich he has sent empty away." I fervently hope that Mr. Meese takes a few minutes off from the important work of sharing his observations with the President of the United States this Advent and reads the Magnificat - in counterpoint, one hopes further, with a recent report issued by the mayors of the cities of this country which identifies hunger as the most pressing problem confronting us and national disgrace.

The meeting between young Mary and her elderly cousin Elizabeth is a highly stylized encounter, painted thousands of times, memorialized in the heavenly beauty of J. S. Bach's "Magnificat." Mary's hymn - "My soul magnifies the Lord" is one of four interesting canticles in the opening section of Luke's Gospel. And many believe that it was used liturgically by the early church.

It is beautiful poetry and it contains a clear expression of the remarkable idea of God's passion, God's partisanship. The birth of Mary's son is presented in a way that seems to advocate the cause of the downtrodden. You don't have to read between the lines: there is no attempt to disguise the partisanship. With talk like "scattering the proud and pulling the mighty from their thrones" in the air it was no wonder King Herod was interested in eliminating the baby as quickly as possible.

One way to deal with this perplexing and disturbing hymn is to transpose literally, to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the vehicle of social upheaval and revolution. And, in fact, the downtrodden, the poor, the oppressed have always read themselves in this text. It is no accident that the Virgin Mary is adored and venerated with extraordinary passion in countries where poverty and political oppression are the norm. You can't read the Bible, after all, from the perspective of a poor person and not be interested at least in a day when "the hungry are filled and the rich are sent empty away." You can't hear these words from the perspective of a political prisoner - Lech Walesa for instance - and not be interested in a day when the mighty are pulled from their thrones. I have been told that there are places in Central and South America where to read Luke 1:38-56 is regarded as a subversive act. And it doesn't take much imagination to feel and understand what the Magnificat means to the El Salvadorian peasant, absolutely poor, powerless, working a plot of ground owned by a land lord who now lives in a condominium in Miami Beach, whose son has been murdered by government troops, trained in the United States. You and I have to work at it, and it is not easy for us, but we must understand that this Advent text means something altogether different when it is heard in the context of Third World poverty and political oppression.

Much of the theology being written today makes us uncomfortable. It is called Liberation Theology. Sometimes it sounds like Marxism. Sometimes that is what it is. And sometimes it is the honest attempt of faithful Christian people to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ into dialogue with a culture characterized by injustice, grinding poverty and hopelessness. The government of El Salvador, to which we are heavily committed, either cannot stop, or does not wish to stop the wanton, systematic slaughter of its own people by Right Wing death squads: 20,000-30,000, including priests, Archbishop Oscar Romero, American Aid officials, labor organizers, people who attend the wrong meetings, talk to the wrong people, and, of course four American nuns. When the relatives of the 30,000 victims hear the Magnificat, they don't need help identifying the proud, the mighty. And what we can't seem to understand is that to those people socialism, Marxism if they know or even care about them, are not threatening ideas, but appear to be hopeful alternatives to being murdered. The tragedy, the continuing tragedy is that we who know best about human dignity and freedom have simply conceded the struggle for the hearts of people to the Marxists in far too many places.

We must listen. We must try to understand what is happening in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala. One of the Liberation Theologians Jose Miguez Bonino, an Argentine, put it this way: "God has chosen sides- he has chosen to liberate the poor by delivering them from their misery and marginality, and to liberate the rich by bringing them down from their thrones." Bonino makes me very uncomfortable. He is a Marxist. He is also a Christian. (Theologians in Transition, p. 172)

Now four observations:

One - We don't have to agree with that, but in that we're all starting from the same text it would be foolish not to listen to it, to pretend that it isn't there.

Two - "We can't resign from the middle class." Harvey Cox, a Harvard Professor, said that, by the way. Cox rather likes Liberation Theology but is honest enough to acknowledge that he is who he is, namely a comfortable teacher at a very comfortable institution.

Three - The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a "Five Year Plan for Redistributing the Wealth." It is not about economics essentially, but about humanity in dialogue with God. It is not simply spiritual - nor is it simply political.

Four - What the Gospel will do, if we bring anything more than superficial interest to it, is force us to be honest about ourselves and to identify some of the myths, the half truths, by which we are living.

When that honest self examination happens we usually discover that we're not as comfortable, at ease, well off, as we like to think we are. Left to our own devices we don't ordinarily come to these conclusions. It's the artists, the poets, the writers, who keep raising the issue, questioning our myths. **The Wasteland,** T. S. Eliot called our culture. Erich Fromm, in the classic The Art of Loving wrote: "Happiness today consists in 'having fun.' 'Having fun,' lies in the satisfaction of consuming...The world is one great object for our appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, we are the eternally hopeful ones - and the eternally disappointed ones." (p. 73) Gertrude Stein said it with tongue in cheek, "When we get there there is no there there." One wonders if the parents who have engaged in physical battle in the aisles of toy departments all over the country to buy their children a Cabbage Patch doll find that "there is no there there when you get there." In her memoirs, Simone de Beauvoir wrote "I think with sadness of all the books I have read, all the places I have seen, all the knowledge I've amassed. The promises have all been kept. And yet I realize with stupor how much I was gypped." (Hans Kung, Does God Exist?, p. 693) And John Steinbeck whose novel The Winter of our Discontent was presented on television last week, wrote about the emptiness and dryness of the American dream of riches and power and security.

Mary's hymn contains God's word to us because you can't receive a gift unless you have some room in your life for the gift, can be pleased and delighted with the gift, in a sense need what the gift represents. If you already have it all, the exchange will be only as significant as the flower the little girl gives to the visiting dignitary who, in one motion, receives, smiles, says a polite "thank you" and hands it over to an attendant whose job it is to carry the unneeded gifts. You can't educate someone who already knows it all. The miracle of learning happens somewhere close to the acknowledgement of ignorance. In fact, a good education is always at least in part a humble acknowledgement of the existence of beauty and truth bigger than one which I do not own and can never fully own, and which I will always need. You can't love someone so full of herself or himself that there is no need for love to touch and no emptiness for love to fill.

The trouble with the mighty, you see - by Israel's lights, and by Mary's rhetoric, is not the might, power and wealth, but the pride, the vanity, the sense that they have, or are on the way to having, what they need. The trouble with mighty people, in the Bible, is that they don't know what in the world to do with a gift and that's what God's love is. That's what is about to happen as Mary talks to Elizabeth.

It is not finally a matter of economics. Pride and vanity are indiscriminate: humility, graciousness, receptiveness come in all income levels.

The word is that God cares deeply, is partisan toward his creation - his people The word is that God hears the cries of people who are oppressed - in peasant shacks in the Third World and in gracious homes in Columbus, Ohio. God hears cries of people hungry for bread - and hungry for love: God hears cries of pain - in Southeast Asia and in hospital wards in the USA; God hears and cares about loneliness and alienation and bitterness and grief and every "winter of discontent." God hears and responds in love and becomes an active participant in the redemption and reconciliation and selection of those he loves.

What is required is honesty, acknowledgement of our needs, confession of our incompleteness. What is required in order to hear the good news of Advent is the courage to acknowledge the fact that all is not well, that we need, every one of us, the love and salvation of the God who created us.

The partisan God wants to save us in love by calling a deep and passionate caring out of us. That's where the sterility and emptiness and real poverty always is - even in the midst of wealth. Those who need nothing - love little, care little, risk little, and ultimately live little.

And that's where the liberation is ultimately: the authentic joy and heavenly Christmas laughter - in a passionate caring for life, the world, one another and the "little ones" - whoever they are: the poor here: the homeless here: the oppressed here. Philosopher Sam Keen writes very wisely: "If I answer the appeal to become a lover, it is no general essence of mankind I am called to love, but my self, my children, my wife, my friends, my community, my land, my people, my world." (op. cit., p. 209)

God's passion for people is on the lips of a very young woman, frightened, confused, and overwhelmed by her unlikely pregnancy, yet certain that the child to be born of her will convey God's love for all. Those who have no need will not notice his birth much. Those who know their need will probably be found once again this year weeping tears of joy and gratitude sometime in the next two weeks.

John Steinbeck borrowed the title for his novel from Shakespeare: the opening lines of King Richard III: "Now is the winter of our discontent Made glorious summer by this sun of York."

That's it! That's the Good News. That's the word of God in Mary's strong Magnificat.

Now - is the winter of **our** discontent
Made glorious summer by **this** sun.

This child to be born, this child who will be called holy, this son of God. Amen.